Secondhand smoke's dangers doubted

Report critical of EPA, OSHA

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A new Congressional Research Service report rebuts government claims that ordinary levels of secondhand smoke are a health hazard.

"The CRS study calls into question the very underpinnings that form the basis of Environmental Protection Agency and OSHA claims regarding the dangers of secondhand smoke," Sen. Wendell H. Ford, Kentucky Democrat, told Joseph A. Dear, assistant secretary for occupational safety and health, in a recent letter.

Mr. Ford, the Senate minority whip, called the new study the latest in a series of reports that "have all led to the same conclusion: There is no scientific justification for smoking bans or de facto bans like the proposed [clean air] rule" issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The CRS, which is prohibited from recommending policy, takes no position on the thorny issue of smoking bans in its report. But it does raise concerns about much of the science and methodology OSHA and EPA used in their environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) risk assessments.

In a report released in 1993, EPA classified ETS as a known human carcinogen, estimating it causes 3,000 lung cancer deaths among nonsmokers in this country each year. The report also blamed ETS for between 150,000 and 300,000 cases of respiratory infection in infants and young children.

But CRS officials challenged the EPA's conclusions, telling a Senate subcommittee: "The statistical evidence does not appear to support a conclusion that there are substantial health effects of passive smoking."

Because the EPA and CRS draw different conclusions from the ETS analyses, some members of Congress asked the CRS to conduct a larger, "in-depth" study of the issue. The new report, issued Nov. 14 after 20 months of review, is the result of those requests.

In an introduction to the CRS report, authors C. Stephen Redhead and Richard E. Rowberg, described ETS as a "highly diluted combination of mainstream smoke exhaled by smokers and sidestream smoke released directly from the burning tips of cigarettes."

The CRS staffers noted that since the EPA report was issued, four large studies examining ETS and lung cancer risk have been completed. Of the four, CRS said, only one found a statistically significant increased health risk from secondhand smoke.

The EPA report estimated that ETS slightly increased the overall risk of lung cancer in nonsmoking women by 1.19 to 1.

"Even when overall risk is considered, it is a very small risk and is not statistically significant," Mr. Redhead and Mr. Rowberg observed in their report.

The EPA has defended its findings and methodology.

The CRS report acknowledged that three of the four recent studies on ETS and lung cancer risk found "statistically significant excess risk" for lung cancer at the "highest" ETS exposure levels.

Had OSHA combined results of all studies that have investigated this issue, "It seems likely that it would have found no increased lung cancer risk from occupational ETS exposure."

— Congressional Research Service report

"Even at the greatest ... exposure levels, the measured risks are still subject to uncertainty," the CRS authors wrote.

Mr. Ford said the EPA has claimed since 1993 that there is "no safe level of exposure to ETS." But he said the CRS report "finds that the only reasonable chance of risk comes in extreme situations," and that, "even in those cases the findings are uncertain and in need of further research."

OSHA examined the lung cancer risk from workplace exposure to ETS as part of its proposed indoor air quality rule, designed to protect employees from harmful air in the workplace.

OSHA determined that ETS boosts the risk of lung cancer and, possibly, heart disease in exposed workers.

The CRS investigators pointed out that OSHA "based its risk assessment on a workplace risk estimate" contained in one study that indicated an increased risk for lung cancer. OSHA "chose not to use the remaining estimates which found no overall association between workplace exposure and lung cancer," they complained.

Had OSHA combined results of all studies that have investigated this issue, "It seems likely that it would have found no increased lung cancer risk from occupational ETS exposure," the report said.

Although the EPA did not scrutinize the effect of passive smoking on heart disease for its risk assessment, OSHA did. The CRS report said that, according to OSHA, heart disease "accounted for more of the risk than lung cancer."

The CRS study noted that many have questioned the "biological plausibility of the passive smoking heart risk estimates" that have emerged from various studies, including one that attributed 62,000 heart disease deaths annually to ETS.

"Further indications that these results may be too large are found in the publication of two large new studies that found no risk of heart disease from passive smoking," the authors wrote.

Given the "seriousness of the findings of this study and the reputation of the organization that is questioning OSHA actions," Mr. Ford urged Mr. Dear to "publicly call for a reopening of your hearings on the proposed OSHA rule."

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